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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 YAOUNDE 001169

SIPDIS

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TAGS: [CM](#) [ECON](#) [EFIN](#) [PGOV](#) [PINR](#) [PREL](#)
SUBJECT: CAMEROON: PRESIDENT BIYA AT 26

REF: A. 07 YAOUNDE 1308
[1](#)B. YAOUNDE 237
[1](#)C. YAOUNDE 1042
[1](#)D. YAOUNDE 933

Classified By: Pol/Econ Chief Scott Ticknor for reasons 1.4 (d) and (e)

[1](#)1. (C) November 6 marked President Paul Biya's 26th year in power. The occasion passed with little of the fanfare we saw at his 25th anniversary, perhaps reflecting greater anxiety and frustration in the country. 2008 was a particularly eventful political year, marked by a controversial constitutional amendment and nationwide riots, but also by the full handover of Bakassi from Nigeria to Cameroon. Biya retains his hold on power but faces mounting security concerns, policy paralysis and significant public discontent. The economy is performing below expectations and the business climate, already poor, has deteriorated in recent years. There is widespread poverty and Cameroon has slid on a number of international performance indicators. Biya has skillfully preserved power for decades and takes pride in ensuring Cameroon's stability. However, the mood in the country is increasingly anxious about stability, both in terms of threats to physical security and in terms of political and institutional uncertainty about the future. End summary.

Historical Perspective

[1](#)2. (C) As noted ref A, President Biya has been at the heights of government in Cameroon since 1977, when he became the Prime Minister of former President Ahmadou Ahidjo. On November 4, 1982 Ahidjo surprised the nation with the announcement he was stepping down after 24 years as Head of State. Biya, his constitutional successor, took over as president two days later. Over the next ten years, Biya survived a series of crises, including a power struggle with Ahidjo and a coup attempt in 1984. Major social unrest in 1990-92 led to a period of slow reform, including an IMF structural adjustment process (1988), multiparty elections (1992), multiparty municipal elections and a new constitution (both in 1996). Biya allowed greater media freedom and opened up more to the outside world.

[1](#)3. (C) 2008 was perhaps the most tumultuous year in Cameroonian politics in the past decade. Starting on January 1, Biya used his New Year's message to announce his intention to modify the 1996 constitution to eliminate presidential term limits. This sparked nationwide discussion of constitutional change, with many in civil society and the opposition strongly opposed. Discontent with the proposed constitutional change contributed to general frustration with rising food and fuel prices and sparked the country's worst

riots in 15 years in February. The government responded with force, resulting in the arrest of over 1,600 people, the death of at least 40 (official figures), and a period of heightened media intimidation. In April, parliament passed the constitutional amendment with virtually no debate, not only eliminating presidential term limits but giving the president immunity from criminal prosecution. The government subsequently released many of those arrested and lifted the restrictions on several media houses.

¶4. (C) On a more positive note, in August, Cameroon took full control of the Bakassi Peninsula, bringing to a close a fifteen year dispute with Nigeria. Biya also stepped up his anti-corruption campaign, dubbed "Operation Sparrow Hawk" ("Eparvier" in French), leading to the corruption-related arrest of four former ministers, including former Finance Minister Polycarpe Abah Abah, and a half dozen other senior officials.

Biya's Ways

¶5. (C) Biya has maintained power through classic authoritarian means. He has combined strategic political openings (as in the 1990s) with the rare, strategic use of force (1992, 2008). He tolerates (although doesn't appear to condone) a high level of corruption, which spreads patronage among his allies and underwrites the activities of the ruling Cameroon People's Democratic Movement (CPDM) party. He has carefully balanced ethnic, regional and linguistic groupings in the military and bureaucracy, which has significantly

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reduced the influence of ethnic or regional politics. The opposition has been largely co-opted, either with ministerial posts, favors or cash. Biya has also maintained a highly centralized, hierarchical political system, with a trusted group of senior statesmen or apolitical bureaucrats at the top (what we call "elders" and "faithful" in ref B). Biya is also famously enigmatic, which he uses to good effect to keep his Cabinet and potential detractors off guard.

¶6. (C) This has yielded a conservative, preservationist regime. Decision-making is slow and very centralized, the bureaucracy is highly dysfunctional. The government places a premium on maintaining stability and Biya would likely see this as his biggest achievement, especially in the context of Cameroon's great ethnic, linguistic, and regional diversity and the instability plaguing many of Cameroon's neighbors.

Will Stability Last?

¶7. (C) Biya's 26th anniversary was marked by a series of press articles underscoring a growing sense of insecurity among the public. Analysts point to the recent spectacular bank robbery in Limbe, a recent pirate attack offshore involving the kidnapping of expatriate oil workers, and an unusually prolonged highway robbery at the entrance of Yaounde. They note the recent death of a military officer in a clash with bandits in the north as well as the embarrassing collusion by gendarmes in the kidnapping of a high profile Equato-Guinean refugee (ref C). Some contacts worry about spillover from insecurity in Chad. The peaceful handover of the Bakassi Peninsula from Nigeria was preceded by numerous banditry attacks, killing over 20 security forces and a local official. Our contacts have expressed frustration that, in face of rising security problems, there has been no significant repercussion on the security leadership. State control is seen as weakening in many parts of the country.

¶8. (C) This is coupled with a growing sense of policy paralysis. Biya recently returned from about six weeks overseas, staying well beyond the UNGA and Francophonie Summit and fueling rumors that he was in ill health (one media source even reported that he had died). He relies on a

small group of advisors for information and, when he is in country, he spends much of his time in his village. While he appears to be (as far as we know) a healthy 75 years old, he did nothing in the past year to reduce uncertainty about succession scenarios; the constitutional amendment leaves open the possibility that he will run again in 2011 (as one senior insider in the presidency told us he plans to do). The amendment also allowed the Senate to be created by municipal councils rather than non-existent regional councils (as required under the 1996 constitution). This suggests Biya's intention to create a Senate, which is supposed to be the constitutional succession mechanism, but he has made no moves to do so yet. Despite public frustration with the current Cabinet, Biya's long expected Cabinet reshuffle has yet to materialize. The creation of an Electoral Commission (ELECAM) was delayed from June to December and it is beginning to appear that that date will also slip. The ruling CPDM announced plans to hold its first Congress in twelve years but has yet to set a date. Although it has had some successes, "Operation Eparvier" has increased friction within the top levels of government and slowed decision making. In some ways, Eparvier has also fueled public impatience because Cameroonians recognize that corruption is still pervasive at all levels and because the government has so far been unsuccessful in returning to Cameroon the proceeds of corruption stashed abroad.

¶9. (C) The February riots were a reminder to many that there is significant discontent among average Cameroonians. Since February, food prices appear to have continued to rise, as has overall inflation. Macroeconomic stability and strong government revenues have not translated into significant economic growth (the Prime Minister's recent downward projection of 4% GDP growth in 2009 is barely above 3% estimated population growth). Fiscal reform has continued but economists are frustrated with the government's failure to improve the business environment. The lack of vision or significant planning in economic management is seen in many areas, including the absence of a clear agriculture strategy and the lack of clarity on the future of the three year IMF program due to expire this December. Most analysts believe

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poverty has not changed much in the past few years and that service delivery is generally poor. Cameroon slipped slightly from 2007 to 2008 in the Transparency International, Freedom House, and World Bank Doing Business reports, as well as in 9 of 17 Millennium Challenge Corporation indicators.

¶10. (C) Some intellectuals and NGO leaders believe this is all pointing to violence as Cameroon heads toward presidential elections in 2011 and parliamentary and municipal polls in 2012 (ref D). A number of other prominent contacts are convinced that a violent transition can be avoided. Some hope voters can be mobilized for real change in 2011. Others are convinced Biya will manipulate the 2011 election period to stay on long enough to ensure a successor of his choosing. Any number of scenarios is possible; Biya's sphinx-like isolation set against the backdrop of an unusually active political year has left many in Cameroon anxious about the future.

Comment

¶11. (C) Biya's legacy over 26 years is mixed. He has delivered stability, some democratic opening, and limited economic reform. Most visitors who have been away for long periods assure us that there has been modest change for the better - more political openness, a lower level of ethnic politics, new construction, less garbage on the streets, and greater economic stability. However, change has come very slowly. Many Cameroonians are convinced that people are worse off today than they were in the 1990s. There is a deep-seated despondency, as reflected in the low turnout in recent municipal elections, this year's subdued national day

parade and the low-key celebration of Biya's 26 years in power.

¶12. (C) Even Biya's detractors fear that if the President were to suddenly die the lack of a viable succession mechanism and the weak state of political institutions could toss the country into a period of chaos. Biya may be able to manage a smooth transition to a post-Biya era - he cares about his legacy and some believe he wants to follow in Ahidjo's footsteps by easing out of office. But there are heightened political risks in the coming few years.

¶13. (C) Many in the government and among the general populace look to the United States to help lead Cameroon through the transition period of the next several years. We have strategic interests at stake in Cameroon; it is a large oil-producing, mineral-rich country with the largest port in Central Africa, whose stability is key to the stability of the entire region. Post will continue to explore how the USG can best use its leverage and pursue our democracy, economic/commercial and security interests in the country as Biya heads into his 27th year in office.

GARVEY